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THE ART OF DEBATE

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1) INTRODUCTION

The art of oratory has fascinated human civilization since the words entered the human vocabulary. There is intense debate surrounding the first-origins of human spoken languages. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Professor Shigeru Miyagawa, who is an expert in linguistics, argues that the earliest human spoken languages can be traced from the cave-art (Nóbrega, Miyagawa, and Lesure 2018). Nóbrega et al. (2018) argue this hypothesis under the topic of cave art and archeoacoustics. They argue that the discovery of cave art is very closely related to the acoustic properties of the cave chambers in which the art is found. The research suggests that early humans were able to detect the sound reverberation in these chambers and the paintings in the caves are based on the sound-experience of the painting artists. The research also suggests that the particular art that is painted on the cave-walls is located on the exact “hot-spot” of the generated sound-echo. The study has been labeled as ground-breaking discovery in understanding the history of spoken words with the sounds associated with human speech and its pitch.

Nóbrega et al. (2018) may have stumbled upon an important discovery in many ways. We associate spoken words with emotions as well. There are words that carry the tone of anger inherent in them and there are words of comfort that carry the resonant sounds associated with them. The factual side of words spoken and the emotional side of the tone associated with the spoken words raises the philosophical question of the primary and secondary qualities of speech.

Albert Mehrabian’s work on verbal and non-verbal in the 1960s raised some ground-breaking discoveries about the impact of non-verbal postures flowing from verbal communication (Mehrabian 1969, 359). Mehrabian (1969) argued that if there is a dichotomy in our spoken word and non-spoken gestures, the likely hood of the non-spoken gesture to be preferred over the spoken word is greater in the majority of the cases studied. The unique feature of human gestures has been described by philosopher Ernst Cassirer as not the animal rationale but the animal *symbolicum* (Cassirer 1992, 52:31).

Debate combines the best of spoken-words and non-spoke gestures. Public debate is seen in almost every walk of life. From politics to academia, public debate is seen as the forum for the exchange of ideas to reaffirmation of ideologies. This paper examines the debating ideas proposed in the material under review (Bellon and Williams 2008). Hereafter the Bellon and Williams (2008) will also be referred to as “**the book**”. The paper will also offer some literature reviews on the topic from other eminent scholars in the field.

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2) FROM SPEECH TO DEBATE

Charles Darwin is viewed as one of the leading scientists to explain human evolution amongst other species. Darwin described the human ability to communicate using voice with gestures as a unique feature of the species. According to Darwin, humans have the capacity for “symbolic-thinking”. Symbolic-thinking manifests in human non-verbal gestures. Darwin argued that human symbolic-thinking cannot be measured and its qualitatively distinct from other ape-families. Darwin commented, “the difference between the mind of the lowest man and that of the highest animal is immense” (Darwin 1896, 1:100).

Bellon and Williams (2008) view debate as part of critical thinking. The book states,

Debate improves critical thinking more effectively than almost any other activity. In a sense, what people mean when they say “critical thinking” is really debate. After all, critical thinking means the ability to analyze a situation and decide how best to judge it. This is, literally, what debate teaches you to do (Bellon and Williams 2008, 6).

Bellon and Williams (2008) are not very far from the commonly held view that debate is, in fact, an extension of the critical-thinking process in any given situation where arguments are being presented. Alfred Russel Wallace, who was a contemporary of Darwin did not find anything unique about the symbolic-thinking ability of humans. Wallace viewed the ability of symbolic-thinking as part of discovery based on evolution by natural selection. Wallace was puzzled by Darwin’s fascination with symbolic-thinking. Wallace even discarded any tangible evolutionary advantages due to this unique capacity for symbolic thinking, such as music and the arts (Wallace 1871, 91).

The emerging tensions between the proponents of the advantages of symbolic-thinking such as Darwin and opponents of any advantages such as Wallace continue to this day. The question of symbolic-thinking being a cognitive feature or due to practice is again contested. Bellon and Williams (2008) consider this a matter of practice and something anyone can master with enough understanding and hard work (10). Bellon and Williams (2008) simply dive into explanations about how college debates are held and what judges look for during these debates (12). The question of what makes a good “debater” or who can be a debater is not that simple. The answer to these questions cannot come from philosophy. Rather, some clues might emerge from indirect evidence from neuro-science. It is because we may not have access to facts about the variability and heritability of this trait in every case during the debate.

Scientists have carefully looked for clues in the human evolutionary history to trace any evidence that might suggest some explanation for the symbolic-thinking emerging at a certain time in human evolution (Tattersall 2009, 109). The first such discoveries were made in the *Blombos Cave* of South Africa that dated back to around 70,000–100,000 years ago. The patterned-type neat carvings at Blombos are suggestive of the first recorded signs of symbolic-thinking in human evolutionary history.

Cognitive psychology is the study of internal mental processes. Cognitive psychology helps explain how thinking takes place inside our brains. This includes perception, memory, attention, problem-solving, and language. The mental processing of a person impacts the learning process. The use of words, their choice and delivery are very much part of the cognitive functions of the brain (Singer 1990, 91).

Autism has many forms. As the research in cognitive psychology continues, it is becoming more evident that autism can severely impact the ability to speak and form arguments. There is also evidence to support that autism prevents outward expression of ideas yet the internal working of the brain is capable of outstanding and in some cases brilliant formulation of ideas (Järvinen-Pasley et al. 2008, 110).

Cross-cultural studies of rhetoric from ancient history provide ample examples of formal use of the language in public discourse. The rhetorical teaching within the field of philosophy in the western world has canonized Aristotelian/Platonic rhetoric as Rhetoric. The study has its defined principles, structure, and engagement conventions (Binkley 2012, 21). Classical rhetoric has gained much attention from scholars of Greek Rhetoric. Thomas Miller wrote a seminal paper on the topic and explained the importance of debate based on the Greek Rhetoric in public discourse (Miller 1993, 70). Miller pointed out that any linear view of debate and the absence of the rhetorical context deprives the debate of its rich history. Miller states, “we have become more broadly engaged with the rhetorical practices of groups who have been excluded by the dominant intellectual tradition” (Miller 1993, 72).

The majority of work such as Bellon and Williams (2008) view debate as situated in particular cultural settings. Such works look to ways that “instruct” students in particular genres of debates, prescribe conventions to follow, and debate practices that suit their particular cultures. Debate is much more than all that. The book states about the nature of our world-views and suggests changing them for the purposes of the debate. It states, “Some critiques argue that our most important problems involve the way we see the world. The alternatives for this kind of critique would be about changing our perspective” (Bellon and Williams 2008, 54). While there are no issues with changing our world views if that happens due to our critical analysis of our position. Suggesting these changes to suit debate is not very pertinent advice.

3) DEBATE: STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE

Famous French writer Marcel Proust’s work became famous outside France not in the original French but in translated English titled “*Swann’s Way*”. Proust declared that “*les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère*” or *beautiful books are always written in a sort of foreign language* (Proust 2013, 1:21). There are always tensions between style and substance. Proust’s work was translated in the English language by the Scottish writer Charles Kenneth Scott Moncrieff. Moncrieff dedicated his entire life to tediously translate Proust’s work till his death in 1930. The brilliance of Moncrieff’s translations is that he created a version of Proust in the English language that is uniquely Proust.

The tensions between style and substance are very profound in academia. Each part of academic teachings requires meticulous adherence to rules that are peculiar to the discipline as well as the institution. These rules of style are labeled as technical details and sometimes as traditions. In a debate, the rules are laid out for the style and the substance has to conform to the style. Bellon and Williams (2008) prescribe various methods to analyse the arguments in debate. The book states,

The style you choose will have a big impact on what kinds of evidence you might choose. Personal experience certainly counts as evidence. If you have relevant experience with the topic at hand, you should not hesitate to use it when you make arguments in a debate round (Bellon and Williams 2008, 85).

The work by Bellon and Williams (2008) is about basic college debate and is perhaps relevant for those who have never really witnessed or participated in formal debate competitions. Their work is not really about explaining why debates are held and what linguistic philosophies underpin the debate. The book also does not offer any background knowledge of English language use in debate competitions.

The book states that *Lexis-Nexis* is the world's largest database of publications. This information is outdated. The world's largest database of publications in EBSCO (the EBSCO acronym is based on the founders, Elton Bryson Stephens Company), which also owns Lexis-Nexis. There is an objectionable part in the book that states

Debaters cheat, and I don't mean that thing you did with your date's best friend at the prom. I mean that people do not always do their own debate research. Should you cheat, too? There are pros and cons to buying prepared research. First the good part. A lot of debaters do this, and it's not really considered cheating (Bellon and Williams 2008, 95).

Bellon and Williams (2008) discuss the pros and cons of *buying* research. This is a slightly disturbing part of the book. Any good school would discourage such practice and perhaps label it as cheating. Part of the debate learning is how to do research. The students are encouraged to engage with their professors as well as the resources available in the libraries to broaden their understanding of the topic presented for the debate. Discussions about the pros and cons of buying research to win a debate is not the highlight of Bellon and Williams (2008) work. The book makes a more sensible argument about what makes a good debate. It states

good debate is about more than reading evidence and making short analytical arguments. Good debate is about explaining the most important arguments in the debate to your judges in such a way that they are persuaded to vote for you. Debates can be complicated, and even the smartest judge needs good explanations in order to understand difficult claims (Bellon and Williams 2008, 102)

This is not bad advice. It is still aimed at winning or losing a debate. The purpose of debate is to win or lose an argument. The purpose of debate is to present ideas and arguments in a civilized setting where there is room for discussion. The art of debate is not just about any style or ways to win arguments. Debate allows us to engage with the topic,

find the relevant proof for our arguments and debate the topic with our peers who might offer an alternative view to the point.

4) CONCLUSION

Debate is part of the critical thinking process. Debate helps to sharpen our cognitive skills. Debate allows us to structure our arguments so that we can provide cogent answers to the opposing view. Debate also helps to develop listening skills. One cannot debate without fully understanding the opposing view. A full rebuttal in a debate can only come if one is able to understand the opposing view and deliver a counter-argument that is convincing and defeats the opponent's argument.

I read the book by Bellon and Williams (2008) and tried to relate the assertions in the book with my own training as a debater. The book fell well short of offering any new advice that could help me in improving my debating skills. In my view, any good book on the art of debate must provide some contextual historical background to the Greek Rhetoric, the symbolic-thinking and voice impact in a debate. Offering straight tips like making flash-cards and using some diagrams to analyse the opposing views are not the best way to teach the art of debate.

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